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SUBJECT: ARMENIA'S NEW HUMAN RIGHTS OMBUDSMAN:  
ALAVERDIAN A GOOD CHOICE

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

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SUMMARY  
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2. (SBU) Larisa Alaverdian, Human Rights Ombudsman-designee, told us that she plans to create a lasting and strong institution that will have a respected place within the Armenian state structure. A former International Visitor Program participant, Alaverdian will initially direct her efforts to harmonizing Armenia's Constitution and laws with its international human rights' treaty commitments, reforming the judiciary, and resolving the longstanding difficulties between the GOAM and the Jehovah's Witnesses. End Summary.

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ARMENIA'S FIRST HUMAN RIGHTS OMBUDSMAN  
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3. (SBU) Larissa Alaverdian confirmed recent press speculation that the President's Office has informed her that she will be appointed Armenia's first Human Rights Ombudsman. The National Assembly created the post of Ombudsman during the Fall 2003 parliamentary session. Under existing Armenian law, the President can appoint the Ombudsman as an official of the executive branch. The appointment is subject to consultations with parliamentary factions. (Note: The Constitution does not require the President to seek parliamentary confirmation for executive appointments, only present the appointee's name for discussion. End Note.) Alaverdian says she is currently awaiting the response from parliamentary leaders on her pending appointment.

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MAKING AN EFFECTIVE OMBUDSMAN  
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4. (SBU) Alaverdian, who participated in a December 2003 International Visitors Program in the United States, told us that her most important priority would be creating a lasting and independent office with a respected place in the Armenian government. She said that she fears that the Office of the Ombudsman will be a weak institution, lacking a mandate and real authority. Alaverdian told us that as Ombudsman she would fight to get an independent budget and clearly defined duties. She plans to inform GOAM agencies, including law enforcement authorities, the Ministry of Justice, and the security services, about her agenda and their obligations under domestic and international law regarding the protection of human rights. Alaverdian plans to establish field offices that would extend her efforts into the regions.

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LIMITED GOALS AT OUTSET  
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5. (SBU) Alaverdian addressed three areas in which plans to concentrate her efforts:

- She will review Armenia's human rights obligations under international law, and encourage the National Assembly to harmonize domestic legal codes with these requirements.
- She proposes a judicial reform initiative that would include monitoring the courts and a program to educate judges on citizen's rights.
- Alaverdian, with the help of National Assembly member Hranush Hakobian, hopes to resolve the difficulties of the Jehovah's Witnesses' in registering as a religious organization.

She also hopes to begin investigations on a backlog of human rights complaints registered with the President's Human Rights Commission.

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COMMENT: TOUGH ROAD AHEAD  
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16. (SBU) We consider the President's appointment of Alaverdian to be an excellent choice and one that could lead to positive developments in Armenia's human rights record. Alaverdian is well-known to the Embassy, participating in a recent International Visitors Program and receiving a Democracy Commission Small Grant for a program to raise youth awareness of their civil liberties. She has earned the reputation of a dedicated but pragmatic defender of human rights, using her political connections and knowledge of the bureaucracy to work within the system to effect change.

17. (SBU) Despite her dedication and qualifications, Alaverdian faces a difficult task in establishing an independent and effective institution. The Ombudsman lacks a clearly defined mandate, and as an executive organ, lacks independence from the authorities and institutions most in need of reform. Alaverdian told us that she is "ready to change things," but to be successful she must also be ready to challenge the authorities and forcefully assert her agenda and prerogatives. Her track record suggests she is one of the best qualified persons in Armenia for this task.  
End Comment.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES  
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18. (U) Larisa Alaverdian, born January 21, 1943 in Baku, trained at the State Pedagogical Institute in Baku from 1961-1966, moved to Yerevan in the mid-1960s, and served on the Supreme Soviet in 1991. She is married. She has held positions at the National Service for Statistics and the Supreme Council of Armenia, as well as in a number of NGOs and most recently on the President's Commission on Human Rights.  
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